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ABSTRACT

For most distance education (DE) systems, distance, time, and/or opportunity isolate learners from their teacher and their fellow students. To facilitate interaction, most DE systems include different types of support groups. Modern technology allows groups to interact effectively even though individuals are far apart. Technology may appear to be the answer to overcoming geographic obstacles; however, the problem of access must be taken into consideration. Institutions must also accept variations in students' needs. Social support groups can address teaching and learning needs and social needs. The type of group used in a specific situation will depend on the geographic distribution of students, the availability of technology, human and financial resources, and the aims of the group support system. Tutor-based groups, self-help groups, and virtual groups are possible alternatives to face-to-face meetings. Dangers of incorporating groups into a support system include students developing dependency on the group; succumbing to peer pressure; and crossing the line between collaboration and plagiarism. Group meetings can be given an unwarranted degree of importance in DE courses. Careful consideration should be given to the possibility that the effort would be better used in improving other components of the DE course, such as the material. (Contains 21 references.) (MN)

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Support Groups in Distance Education

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For most distance education systems, distance, time or opportunity isolate learners from the teacher and from their fellow students. The system should attempt to cater to the student as an individual, even though content delivery involves mass production. Suitably prepared course material can reduce the effect of isolation from the teacher, but often it is only through interaction with others that full understanding occurs. To facilitate interaction most systems include different types of support groups, which may or may not include a teacher. This is an introduction to issues associated with such groups.

context

ESTABLISHING CONTEXT

This paper addresses distance education systems where opportunities for students to meet frequently are limited by time, distance or resources. This paper does not cover systems where students are attending weekly video sessions, or an equivalent. In such cases student-group dynamics are more closely related to part-time, on-campus study.

- CONTENT DELIVERY is the presentation of the syllabus to the student.
- The SUPPORT SYSTEM that accompanies content delivery aims to:
  - help the student develop their understanding of the content,
  - help the student identify areas of weakness and to overcome these,
  - provide administrative support, such as counselling.
- For large population courses, TUTORS may be employed to support small groups of students under the supervision of a central academic.
- The ASSESSMENT SYSTEM aims to measure the level of the student's understanding.

It is essential that the support groups in a course be integrated with all other components. The group's role in the course should be clearly defined and the benefits of participation clear; the rewards should justify the costs involved.

GEOGRAPHICAL CONSTRAINTS

For groups to work, members have to be able to communicate with one another. The geographical distribution of students can be a major factor. Arranging for a group of urban students to meet face-to-face can be easy; in country areas, getting to a meeting can involve considerable travel and expense.

You need to decide, at the institutional level, a number of questions:

- must all students be guaranteed the same access to groups? For example, if it is impractical for rural students to physically gather into groups, should this opportunity be automatically denied to urban students?
- where equity cannot be ensured, should disadvantaged groups be allocated additional resources to redress the imbalance? For example, should a free telephone conferencing service be provided for groups of rural students as a substitute for face-to-face meetings?
- is it appropriate to segregate the student body by geographical location? Are there unique qualities to mixed groups that would enhance the learning experience?
- can separate group activities be combined efficiently to offset the cost of attending sessions? Travelling two hours each way to attend six, two-hour tutorials seems inefficient compared to attending two, day-long sessions.
- can meeting places be decentralised? For example, instead of the students having to travel to the tutor, could the situation be reversed to decrease the distance that students need to go?

TECHNOLOGICAL CONSTRAINTS

Modern technology allows groups to interact effectively even though individuals are far apart. Video conferencing allows for live sound and image sharing, which most closely resembles the classroom environment; this is, however, likely to remain an expensive option. Telephone and radio conferencing have been used in a number of countries to good effect, but this can also be costly either in capital outlay or in renting communication time for the institution or student. The latest addition to the suite of technological options has been the Internet, with e-mail, mailing lists, news groups, bulletin boards and chat groups.

While technology may appear the answer to overcoming geographical obstacles, there is the problem of access. The availability of modern communication technologies is often linked to household income, which again raises the question of equitability and the danger of inadvertently segregating students. Attempting to address such imbalances can be expensive for the institution. The effectiveness of allocating resources needs to be considered; for example, would using the funds to improve course content be more beneficial?

ACCEPTING VARIATION IN STUDENT NEEDS

Too often, institutions plan for only one type of student. The vast majority of students believe that face-to-face meetings with the tutor and fellow students are an essential component of education. Such group meetings can greatly help understanding and morale, but not all students thrive in such situations. Some actually prefer the isolation that distance education offers; group dynamics can be intimidating and distracting. For others, attending group meetings may be a burden financially, or in terms of time and effort.

It is important to keep in mind that not every student will feel participation in group meetings is important. Any group support system needs careful consideration before, for example, making attendance compulsory. You may feel it is essential a science student spend time in a laboratory, but is it essential for a business student to attend an accountancy tutorial that only revises techniques presented in the course material? Having to attend a meeting that covers material already comprehended can be most frustrating for the student.

needs

WHAT NEEDS CAN BE ADDRESSED BY GROUPS?

Too often it seems the only justification for organising students into groups for lectures, tutorials or exercise classes is that everyone else has done it and continues to do it. Given the resource limitations for institutions and students, it is essential that every element of a course meet a real need, in particular so that resources can be appropriately allocated.

TEACHING AND LEARNING NEEDS

Parts of the syllabus may require students to work together in groups. Many subjects now incorporate group project work to provide a more practical experience for students.

Most common student errors, problems, misunderstandings and queries can be predicted and covered in the course material, but not all. The effort required to provide additional explanation in the material may not be efficient, particularly given the many ways that students can interpret content. Discussing one student's difficulty in a group can efficiently answer several students with the same difficulty, and reinforce the understanding of those without the problem.

The tutor can sort students into mixed-ability groups to encourage peer tutoring. Sometimes tutors find it difficult to simplify their language to a level everyone can relate to, but students who have mastered a concept will usually describe it in terms that other students can understand. A student is more likely to appreciate the nature of the difficulty that another student is trying to explain. Even when there is no student with all the answers, discussing a problem as a group can discover the answer or a deeper meaning through brainstorming or debate.

Students unable to see the big steps taken by the lecturer and the course material can, as a group, discover the smaller steps toward the same end. Solving problems as a group helps generate a sense of community, and improves morale.

One of the obstacles to effective communication in formal group sessions is the reluctance some students feel in seeking help from the lecturer. Seeking help from a fellow student may not be such an obstacle.

Left to their own devices, students can be convinced they can satisfactorily answer any self-assessment questions in the course material. However, when faced with the task of publicly explaining or defending their understanding, the student may realise their comprehension is not as deep as the course requires. By encouraging students to challenge each other's understanding, the group benefits from peer tutoring in two ways: those who don't understand hear explanations in language they can appreciate, and those who do understand, get to test their arguments. Of course, care has to be taken by the tutor to ensure the arguments accepted by the group are accurate.

SOCIAL NEEDS

Studying in isolation can be dangerous. Isolated students can become demoralised by their difficulties, believing that they alone find the subject difficult. Being able to see in a group that other students are also struggling reassures them that they are not alone. On sharing the problem with others, it becomes less daunting; comprehension can result from peer debate. Of course, it can be a major blow to morale if a student is alone in the group in finding something difficult. It is crucial that the tutor step in at this stage to provide individual attention and reassurance.

Pacing is difficult for independent learners. Maintaining the self-discipline to study a little every night, to refuse invitations to social gatherings in order to read material, or to isolate oneself from the family environment, is very challenging. Peer pressure at group meetings can be a motivator. Knowing that a group will be discussing the next section at its next meeting can spur the student to resist temptation.

For some students, it is the act of meeting that is important. Not everyone is totally convinced of the equivalence of distance education to conventional education. Many strongly identify with the need to be in a classroom with other students, listening to the expert. For such students, formal group sessions establish within their minds that they *are* students in the conventional sense. Distance education purists may belittle this need, but formal group meetings could be very important to students wanting to establish their credibility within a skeptical society.

For large population courses it may be necessary to divide students into smaller groups for support activities. This ensures that individuals can receive attention as well as gain a sense of belonging, which is difficult when there are too many people.

groups

TYPES OF GROUPS

What type of groups are used will depend on the geographical distribution of students, availability of technology, human and financial resources, and the aims of the group support system.

TUTOR-BASED

Most distance education systems have a subject expert meet with a group of students to discuss the course according to a published schedule. Theoretically, such sessions are student-centred; the tutor identifies the

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difficulties of each student and addresses them directly, dealing with the individual rather than with the entire student body. A lecture simply repeats what has already been covered in the course material, and the parts identified by the lecturer as likely to cause difficulty may not be the ones students actually find difficult. Lectures can also be taped and distributed; the student does not even need to physically attend.

Students in my own institution are generally resistant to the student-centred approach. Arrangements are made for groups of up to 35 students to meet with their tutor but attendance is voluntary, and only 12 to 15 students actually turn up on average. We have found that students are instead attracted to tutors who lecture. These lectures can be so popular that tutors who faithfully organise student-centred sessions are left with few students.

The opportunity to have their own tutor's personal attention in a small group is not always a sufficient incentive to keep students away from the lectures. Students with lots of distance education experience acknowledge the logic of student-centred sessions, but still express a preference for lectures. This suggests that a sense of belonging to a conventional academic community is more important than personal attention.

Pressure on the individual student in a lecture is much less, and there may be a tendency for students to avoid personal exposure. It can be difficult for academics to create an atmosphere in which students can feel confident about participation. When group meetings are relatively infrequent, group identity is difficult to establish and nurture.

There is a certain amount of tension in structuring tutorials. Distance education theory insists that student-centred sessions are in the students' long-term interest, but if students react against this approach is it right to deny them what they want? Is there a tendency to downplay the social needs of students in favour of more academically acceptable needs?

SELF-HELP GROUPS

Formal group sessions are often relatively infrequent, and some students may need more regular opportunities to discuss their difficulties with others. In the absence of sufficient resources to cater for this demand formally, institutions can encourage students to organise themselves into self-help groups for peer tutoring. Such groups meet at times and places decided by the students themselves.

The hardest part of forming self-help groups is the initial start up; students are often strangers to each other. It is helpful if the tutor can be the initial point of contact for those interested in joining. Institutions are invariably unable to provide accommodation, so it is important to keep the groups small for meetings to be held in people's homes, or in cafes. It also helps if an enthusiastic group leader can be identified from the beginning. Organising meetings can be onerous, and a self-help group can collapse without at least one person accepting responsibility for keeping it going.

ALTERNATIVES TO FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS

Technology can be used to enable groups to meet when other factors prevent face-to-face meetings. However, it is a mistake to assume that all that is required is the infrastructure. Most technology requires specific skills.

TELEPHONE CONFERENCING may seem a simple concept, but users have to accept a certain amount of central control to avoid several people attempting to speak at the same time. In a classroom the lecturer often relies on body language to indicate who should speak next, or to encourage a reluctant participant. Such is not possible over the telephone. Alternative signals are required and all participants must be aware of what they mean.

VIDEO CONFERENCING may appear to provide a complete alternative to the classroom, but many people are uncomfortable with communicating via a camera.

THE INTERNET offers a number of different communication channels but currently requires users to be computer literate. Text-based communication can be confusing and is subject to great variation in interpretation. Group dynamics on the Internet are also very different to those within a room.

The use of any technological solution for group meetings means that the necessary skills have to be identified, and suitable training provided, at the beginning. The additional burden this places on the student will be a disincentive to participation unless benefits are quickly realised.

VIRTUAL GROUPS

Given the nature of distance education, the Internet does offer new opportunities for support groups where this technology is available. The Internet incorporates both synchronous and asynchronous communication. The former allows members of a group separated by distance to communicate with each other live, through technologies like chat. The latter allows exchanges where members are separated by distance as well as time.

Most distance learners find it difficult to free themselves from commitments to attend a face-to-face meeting. Posting messages through a mailing list, bulleting board or news group to be read later by other group members removes the time constraint; it doesn't matter that one student contributes at midnight and another before breakfast. Frequently interactions occur over much longer periods, but contributions are better thought out rather than spontaneous.

It is a mistake to assume that group work in a face-to-face environment can be transferred directly to virtual groups. The dynamics of electronic communication are very different. For example, it is easier to ignore e-mail messages than a direct question; it is easier to be aggressive through a computer interface than when addressing someone in person.

The size and nature of virtual groups do not have to obey the rules of face-to-face meetings. Groups can be of any size, allowing the entire student body on a course to be involved. This is normally impractical for large population courses. Groups can meet at times selected by students, rather than by administrators needing to timetable their physical resources.

DANGERS

The disadvantages of incorporating groups into a support system are not reasons for avoiding group activities, but organisers need to consider their potential consequences.

DEPENDENCY

In terms of study time, any group meeting represents a very small proportion of the total effort put into a course. Yet, students often assign them a very high status. Where tutorials tend towards lectures, students may wait for the tutor to present a summary before working on the material. This is an attempt to identify important topics and to reduce the amount of study.

When faced with a problem, students may wait for a group meeting to ask for help rather than attempt to overcome the difficulty. This disrupts the planned study pattern. Similarly, if a group meeting is to discuss a specific topic, the students are under pressure to prepare the topic in advance. This dependency detracts from one of the key features of distance education: allowing the students to study when they want.

PEER PRESSURE

In certain subjects, the development of independent thought by a student can be hampered by group dynamics. When most people in a group express a joint opinion there is pressure on the others to conform. In some cases the majority may even persuade a student to abandon the correct solution in favour of an incorrect one.

COLLABORATION

Learning from one another can be very important in the development of a student's understanding of course content; however, there is a difficult balance between joint collaboration and plagiarism. At best, it is easy to fall into the belief that another's understanding and answers coincide with yours, when in fact it is blind acceptance of the views of the group. At worst, it is blatant copying.

Peer tutoring is so useful that it would be an error to prevent it. It is essential however that students are made aware of the dangers of collaborating on content and assessment, both in terms of official reaction to plagiarism and in terms of plagiarism's effect on the long term development of an individual's understanding.

COSTS VS BENEFITS

Group meetings can be given an unwarranted degree of importance in a course. Students find it easier to complain about the quality of tutorials than about the course material. Institutions then react by putting more effort into the meetings, and it is debatable whether the resulting improvements justify the effort. Careful consideration should be given to the possibility that the effort would be better used in improving other components of the course, such as the material. This is not to argue against trying to improve the quality of group meetings, but an appropriate balance must be maintained between all elements of a course and the availability of resources.

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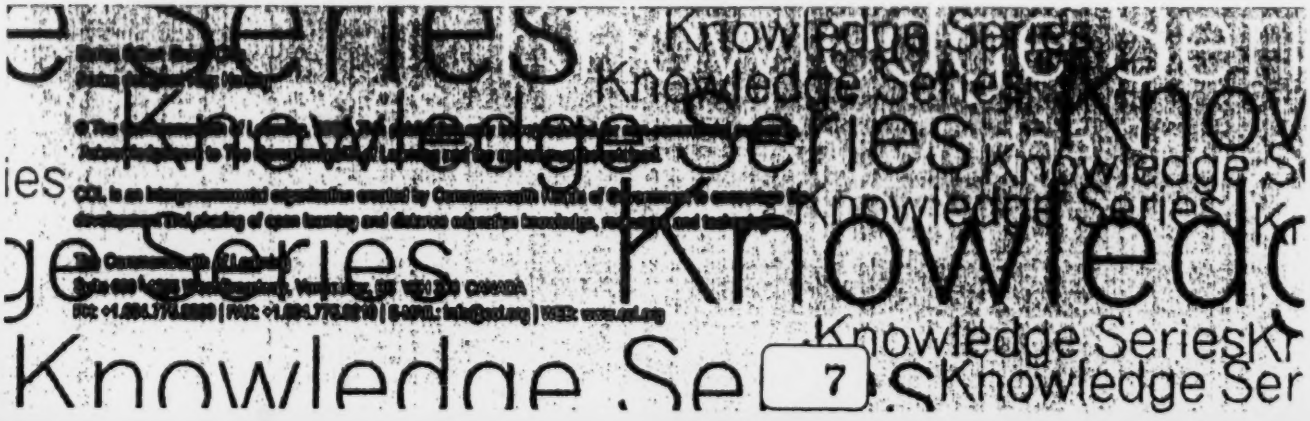
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